

Into the Light - Reflections from a New Coach

John Pieper, Wisconsin

Since 1989 the Walt Disney Company has presented Disney's American Teacher Awards, saluting outstanding members of the teaching profession. Specifically, the program honors those teachers whose approaches exemplify creativity in teaching and who inspire a joy of learning in their students. In 2003 John Pieper was one of 30 teachers nationwide who received this award. CFG coaches training was one of the benefits included with this special recognition.

In our next three issues we are going to follow John's journey as a new CFG coach.

In the midst of a magical Disney experience, I found myself facing an element of darkness. It wasn't a literal darkness, but rather that unsettling feeling you get when you are about to face a totally new situation that you know absolutely nothing about. Fortunately, I would not be facing this adventure alone. A collection of equally bewildered teachers, all relative strangers, assembled in a large hall. There was an air of mystery and anticipation. We were to receive special training in something called Critical Friends Groups. Little did I know that this training would start me on an incredible journey.

Stephen Spring and Steven Strull were the Zen-like guides who would lead us through this personal and professional transformation. They were totally in control. I remember being very impressed with how effortlessly they moved us from one concept or activity to another. They instilled a sense of confidence in us as we took the time to practice these things called protocols. Not only was I given the opportunity to look inward, but more importantly, the participants were able to exchange ideas with each other. This group of relative strangers connected in an amazing way. We entered into a bond that reminded me of the unique camaraderie men in combat experience. We found strength and sol-

ace in each other. We stood united in our belief that one individual can make a difference in the life of a child. We gained a new appreciation in knowing that the love or pain of a child had made an incredible difference in our lives.

The training first moved me from the sense of darkness into shades of gray, and then it created a glimmer of hope. Perhaps this work would be something I could actually use at school. Midway through the training that hope burst into a bright and shining beacon. It was a vision based on the realization that this work did have the potential to create a learning environment where collaboration was the rule rather than the exception. My mind raced with the possible benefits this work could bring to my classroom, school, and district.

My enthusiasm burned even brighter when I attended this incredible function called a Winter Meeting. I likened it to something that was halfway between a family reunion and a cheerleader camp. I don't think I had ever seen so many people so excited and so committed to something pertaining to education. I felt blessed because my principal and district supported my efforts to learn more about this new and fantastic work.

The action plan I developed toward the end of my training took on two distinct parts. As a new CFG coach it would be my responsibility to generate a basic understanding of the CFG work with the staff at my school. I was

chomping at the bit to gather a team of recruits and lead them into meaningful CFG work. There was student work to be tuned, articles to be shared, norms to be implemented and reflections to be

written. But alas, by the time I became a "certified" CFG coach, it was too late in the year to organize a real CFG. I had to be content to scheme and dream. My enthusiasm continued throughout the summer. The other portion of my action plan was also a reflection of



John Pieper

my idealistic thinking. My vision was to carry this work beyond my school to as far as I could take it.

The new school year has started and I will begin the implementation of my plan within the next week. We have often used the lighthouse as a symbol for learning at our school. As I reflect on my CFG training, that symbolism takes on new meaning. Education can be a storm tossed sea. We have many at risk students who need to be beckoned into the safety and calm of our welcoming harbor. We offer the light of knowledge. How smooth the sailing will be if my light is passed on to those around me. It is my time to shine. ■

John Pieper is a fifth grade teacher at Webster Stanley Elementary School in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. John's background includes regular and special education teaching experiences. He has been teaching for twenty two-years. You can contact him by email at jpieper@new.rr.com